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Empathy

OC OC

Let me tell you a story:

Ever since I was a child, I dreamed about captaining my own spaceship. I imagined myself zooming through the galaxy, meeting alien races, saving people, showing off humanity's bravery, our strength, our cleverness. Being a shining beacon of hope throughout the universe. *Humanity, fuck yeah!* I would think.

But when I got to the academy and started studying alien races, I realized how naive I had been. We're not the strongest race there is. We're not the smartest. We're not the bravest. We're better at some things, and worse at others. We're middling. It was a real blow to my ego.

I mentioned it to one of my professor, asking if there was anything - *anything!* - that we do better than other species. I remember the look he gave me. It was a hard and serious look. And then told me the one thing that we're better at than any other species.

Empathy.

I thought it was a bullshit answer. Who gives a fuck about empathy? It's true that in comparison to other races, the human brain is more developed to experience empathy. But it just didn't feel like a quality to be proud of. It felt like being told by your mother you have nice hair.

I'll admit, it put a real damper on my enthusiasm for exploration. But I kept going. I worked, I studied and eventually I graduated. I became an officer on a ship of the Terran Union and I saw the galaxy. And it turns out my conclusion had been correct. We are middling.

No one scampered away in terror at the sight of an approaching human. Or looked on in awe. We weren't even sneered at, considered lowly or upstarts. We were just...there. When we encountered other races, some remembered hearing about our species, other didn't. There are hundreds of FTL races, we didn't warrant special attention.

Eventually, I accepted it. It sucks, but that's life, isn't it? Accepting disappointment and making the best of it.

I continued to serve on star ships. And I did well. I advanced. And eventually, I became the captain of my own ship.

Not a grand war cruiser or anything. My ship is little more than a glorified cargo ship, transporting goods, messages and people to other worlds within the Galactic Alliance.

One day, we were sent to drop off some supplies on a small backwater colony planet called Treft. You may not remember the name. That's okay.

It was a farming planet. It had maybe 100 people from several different species. No humans, but there were families. People who had gone there to start their own lives. It was admirable.

You might notice I keep saying 'was.' That's because when we got there, it was burning.

Raiders had been there. They had hit hard and fast. They grabbed everything that wasn't nailed down, burned whatever they didn't need, and killed whoever tried to stop them.

It wasn't done out of cruelty. It was done out of a sense of efficiency. If homes are burning, their owners are too busy trying to put it out to stop you. And if somebody tries to stop you, they are slowing you down, so killing them is the most efficient thing to do. Simple math. But to me it wasn't math.

We landed on that planet and did what we could to help. Put out the fires, tend to the wounded.

After the fires were gone, I wandered around, seeing if any supplies could be salvaged for the colonists to use. And that's when I saw her.

This little girl, who looked to be about six or seven by human standards. I don't know what race she was. She looked like a cross between a koala and a cat, but with green fur. She was wearing a simple dress which had a few burn marks and was covered in ash. She was clutching a little doll in her arms. She was kneeling in the dirt. And in front of her I can only assume were her parents. Lying on the ground. Dead.

She just knelt there. Silent. Staring at the unmoving forms of her parents. Tears soaking into her fur.

I remember walking up to her and placing a hand on her shoulder. She flinched, but didn't say or do anything. Then I bent down and picked her up, holding her close.

At first she was stiff as a board, barely acknowledging me. But then I felt her tiny arms move, wrap around my neck, squeezing me.

And then she wailed.

I will never, for the rest of my life, forget that wail. The sheer despair and terror and loneliness that only a child can feel so completely. I will never forget as her entire body shook, the tears and cries not enough to expel all those feelings she had deep inside of her.

I hugged her. I rocked her. I made calming noises. None of it made a difference to her.

I remember crying too. Not wailing. Not sobbing. Just tears running down my cheeks as I carried her back to the make-shift shelter where the other survivors were.

One of them approached me, said she had been the girl's neighbor and that she could take her.

The girl resisted. Her arms squeezed more tightly around my neck. I don't think it was me in particular she wanted to hold on to. She just wanted something - *anything* - to be solid and constant in her world. For those minutes I had been carrying her, I had been a solid foundation for her to hold on to. Eventually, we were able to shift her over to the neighbor, and the girl clung to her just as fiercely. I walked away. I never found out her name.

A few hours later, members of the Galactic Alliance militia showed up. Much like we did, they did what they could to help salvage what was salvageable and prepared the survivors to be transported to another planet.

When I asked what they were going to do about the raiders, they said there was nothing they could do. Again, this wasn't cruelty. It was logic. To chase after the raiders would be an FTL chase. It would be jump after jump after jump, putting strain on the engines until finally one gave out. Maybe it would be the raiders', maybe it wouldn't be. But it would take days, maybe weeks. It wasn't worth the resources.

I walked back to my ship, and as I did, I remembered what my professor had said to me: Empathy. And I understood.

I didn't just understand that girl's pain. I felt it. I felt her loss as if it had been my own parents that had been killed. My own home that had been violated. I felt hers and everyone else's pain on that world. And I realized I didn't give a damn about time and resources. I just wanted to get those responsible for this pain.

I gathered my crew and told them. I told them I wanted to chase down the bastards who did this. To teach them what a mistake they had made. And I told them if anyone was against it to speak up now. They were all silent.

They had seen their own horrors, shed their own tears. Not one was unmoved by what they had seen. And so we went.

The raiders had little more than a day head start and we quickly tracked down their FTL signature. We barely had time to order their surrender before they jumped. And we followed. Again. And again.

The next few days were a blur of jump after jump. Coming out of the jump, racing towards them, only to have them spin up their engines and jumping again, and us following closely behind.

We barely slept, doing everything in our power to keep our ship running, to make sure that we outlasted them.

We were tired and frustrated. One more than one occasion I thought about giving up. That this was foolish and pointless. And then I thought about that little girl, and all the sorrow and rage within me, and I kept going. And so did my crew.

5 days, 3 hours and 15 minutes. That is how long the chase from Treft lasted until finally the raiders engines gave out. We didn't hesitate.

My ship isn't a war ship and my crew aren't soldiers. We were not ever intended for combat. And yet the raiders never stood a chance. Maybe they were tired after the long chase. Maybe they never dealt with anything more dangerous than a defenseless colony. Or maybe the rage of my crew was just too much for them.

Whatever the case was, we crushed them. We boarded the ship and took them all prisoner.

"And that's how we got here," the captain said, a humorless smirk on their face, turning towards the leader of the raiders, who was tied and bound to a chair. "What do you think of my story? Can you guess the moral of it?"

The raider swallowed, eyes wide, trying uselessly to escape his bonds, to flee from this insane human.

"Please!" he begged. "I'm sorry! I'll never do it again, I swear!"

The captain leaned forward, cupping the raider's head between both hands, nails digging into his temples.

"See!? There it is! The fear! The terror! You *are* capable of feeling it." The captain's face was inches from the raider's, sour breath against his skin. "But it wasn't for those colonists. You didn't feel anything for them. I bet you aren't even feeling anything for your crew who right now are at the mercy of my crew.

"No, this terror you feeling is all about you. And that's the problem."

The captain let go, chest heaving, as if they had been running a marathon. They walked over to a table where they picked up a large wrench. They hefted it, feeling the weight in their hand.

"My professor was right. We do feel empathy more than others. Sometimes it hurts us, but it also makes us stronger. Gives us strength." They turned again to look at the raider. "I want you to know, just like I felt the colonists' pain and terror, I'm going to feel yours as well."

Then they raised the wrench high and swiftly brought it down onto the raider's knee.